

Part V



Elective Affinities

Readers and scholars have debated for two centuries what Goethe really meant when he borrowed the concept of “elective affinity” from chemistry to title his great novel of marriage and infidelity (*Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, 1809, translated into English as “elective affinities” and also as “kindred by choice”). Did Goethe truly believe that human choice is determined by the laws of chemistry, or was he using the idea of elective affinities merely metaphorically and as a plot device? We editors selected the phrase for this section heading to underscore that time spent learning, thinking, and writing about Eastern Europe is a choice, an election. To state this in terms that Kacandes uses in her essay, “Can logic fully explain why two people like each other or why somebody gets interested in a person or a place?” Probably not. We like the idea of a chemical reaction because it implies that there’s something factual to be examined, and yet that examination, at least as carried out in these two closing essays, cannot be conducted in a strictly scientific or academic fashion. Both contain personal narrative with a high level of self-consciousness about voice, appropriation, and motivation for the elected affinity.

In “The Balkan Notebooks,” Ann Cvetkovich combines accounts of specific incidents and affects that she experienced during her trips to the former Yugoslavia with accounts of her readings of other writers on those spaces. While she evokes the idea of “rites of return” (Hirsch and Miller), she queries what one learns by making a trip oneself. Cvetkovich treads carefully, acknowledging that her family spoke little about the places they’d come from, that family native informants were already deceased when she traveled, and that her own inability to speak the local language limits the types of contact she can have. Furthermore, whatever knowledge she will

acquire by “going there,” does not equate with “knowing there.” Cvetkovich has long insisted on the value of writing as an activity, especially in the absence of archives. The writing she shares with us here bears testimony to her affective choice to connect with this place, its history, and its people.

Irene Kacandes’s contribution might be said to involve the more tenuous connection, the even more “elected” affinity, so to speak. “Gratuitous” is one word she chooses. In “A Polish Childhood,” Kacandes describes a friendship she cultivated with an older stranger who it turns out grew up in wartime Poland, a place and period Kacandes has studied professionally. When Kacandes reveals that her own interest in Poland started in childhood, triggered by learning of the exploits of Tadeusz Kościuszko in the American Revolution, we realize that the essay’s title sets up an ambiguity: whose childhood is under discussion here? Could these childhoods and their “Polishnesses” be connected in some strange way? Ultimately the story of this friendship seems to disclose not so much answers to the questions that it raises as to bring our attention to the possibility that all affiliations are ultimately discontinuous and elected. This strikes us as a framework for a productive reconsideration of the topics raised in this anthology.

Chapter Nine

The Balkan Notebooks

Ann Cvetkovich



TRAVEL STORY 1: GRAČAC (2004)

When you travel in terrain for which you have very few pre-existing images, everything you see is of potential interest, and my first trip to Croatia in 2004 filled in blanks of many kinds. While on a teaching exchange in Paris for a semester, I was drawn to tourist ads in the Metro featuring the gorgeous beaches of the Dalmatian coast, which didn't quite fit my image of either genocidal war or drab post-Soviet culture. I wasn't just interested in resort vacations, though; as a theorist of trauma cultures, I was also curious to know about the aftermath of recovery from the region's wars and conflicts of the 1990s and wondered whether that history might still be visible alongside the re-emergent tourist culture. And I had a more personal motivation—I hoped to see the places my grandparents had left behind when they immigrated to Canada in the 1920s. My last name is often the only visible sign of my heritage, even to me, since, despite Canada's celebration of multicultural identities, I grew up having no idea what it meant to be Yugoslavian, or Croatian, or Serb—or which one I was. Even though my own connection to the region was effaced by migration and assimilation, as well as war and shifting maps, I still wanted to know where my family came from.

With my girlfriend, Gretchen, as my reluctant companion, we headed inland in a rental car on a day trip from Split to a town called Gračac, where, according to my aunt, my Serbian grandfather had come from. It wasn't much more than a name on a map close to the border with Bosnia, although I knew that the Krajina region, because it was predominantly Serb, had been the site of a lot of fighting during the war that led to Croatian indepen-

dence in 1991. We had just spent an idyllic week island-hopping by cheap public ferry amidst a picturesque legacy of ancient and medieval cultures that made Croatia seem more like Italy than Eastern Europe. Old ladies met us at the ferry docks to offer *sobes* (rooms) in their houses with the backyard vegetable gardens and fig trees, we swam from rocky beaches in the clear blue waters of the Adriatic, and we ate Croatia's version of Mediterranean cuisine, fresh fish and *blitva* (potatoes and greens) grilled in homemade olive oil. Although there were signs of war in Dubrovnik—the ruins of a waterfront hotel, stories of guns being fired from the hills on the town below—there was enough rebuilding that you could ignore the evidence unless you were looking for it.

The steep roads through the mountains were good, but they required our full attention to navigate, and the dry rocky terrain seemed desolate, especially compared to the Dalmatian coast. On the other side, the terrain became greener, but we also began to see abandoned houses covered in bullet holes and graffiti, their missing roofs and walls suggesting they had been actively destroyed, not just neglected. Despite warnings about active land mines, we stopped to explore one. It looked like it had been left in a hurry—the twisted metal remnants of a stove, a table and chairs, and a sofa were still visible through the blasted-out windows, and broken dishes and rusted silverware were scattered on the ground. Along a pockmarked concrete wall, a pink rose bush was in full bloom, as poignant evidence of life's persistence, but the messy debris inside made it difficult to see the potential for regrowth and repair. We felt just a little too self-conscious and anxious to take in either the beauty or the wreckage, less from a fear of danger than a sense that we shouldn't be looking at the scars and remnants.

The town of Gračac was even more grim. The streets were lined with the gray concrete facades and broken and missing windows of abandoned buildings that might once have been industrial but were too far destroyed to identify. There was very little commercial activity in the center of town and certainly no provisions for tourists, but we did manage to find a little café where we could get a coffee and appear to have a reason for stopping other than impertinent voyeurism. People were not particularly welcoming and seemed to be watching us as much as we were watching them, and since we had only a few words in the language, we couldn't really communicate. We felt increasingly conspicuous, and although we would have liked to stroll around and take pictures, it felt awkward to turn the ethnographic gaze on a poor and still struggling community or to make a spectacle of their hardship.

Instead we drove a little beyond the town and turned into an empty field filled with abandoned cars, some of which had been crushed into colorful cubes of orange, red, and blue and stacked together in what looked like

a sculpture installation. There were no people around, and it was a relief to finally pause and look without feeling awkward, to stare at these accidental works of art with their rusty crevassed surfaces and random foreign logos. Juxtaposed against the backdrop of the green and hilly landscape, they made for a familiar and picturesque ruin rather than one haunted by violence because so obviously connected to someone else's grief and loss. Calmed a bit, I also felt more able to linger at our next stop—a cemetery where I searched without success for the name Cvetkovich (or Cvetković), but was gratified at least to find names that seemed obviously Serbian, since it was still a novel discovery to me that there had been Serbs in Croatia. The crushed cars, however, remain one of the most vivid memories of the day, because we had been able to slow down long enough to actually see them.

There was nothing else we could think of to do so we turned around. On the trip back through the mountains along the steep and winding roads to the ocean, Gretchen was impatient about being stuck behind a truck and pulled out to pass, only to find herself in the path of an oncoming vehicle with no way to get back into our lane. Instead she crossed the road and came to an abrupt stop against a traffic barrier on the narrow shoulder—we were lucky that there was just enough room for the oncoming vehicle to pass by us. The fender of our car was mangled, but fortunately the damage was merely superficial, and despite being shaken, we pressed on.

Once we had safely returned to Split, Gretchen acknowledged that she had acted impulsively on the road because she was so rattled by what we had seen, especially the abandoned house. Later, in reading more about the area, I realized that the empty houses had probably been abandoned by Serbs and that the current inhabitants of Gračac were likely the Croats who remained or others who had taken over their properties. This wasn't quite what I expected—I thought the Serbs were the ones who had persecuted the Croats. I took some small comfort from the thought that even if much of what I observed was opaque to me, I had learned something from making the trip to see for myself.

WHERE ARE YOU FROM?—A RESEARCH QUESTION

This essay belongs to the increasingly common genre of narrative accounts of return to the homeland by first-, second-, and even third-generation children of immigrants seeking to learn about their heritage across the disruptions of diaspora, assimilation, and cultural loss. Marianne Hirsch and Nancy K. Miller have called such journeys “rites of return,” in recognition of the way that they are affectively driven and yield uncertain results, with ritual some-

times a necessary substitute for the actual recovery of a lost homeland or people. The child of immigrants falls somewhere between insider and outsider, expert and amateur, perhaps begging the question of their differences, but nonetheless susceptible to distortions both factual and affective.

Some backstory, although a sketchy one. My grandparents came from what is now officially Croatia but what I knew growing up to be Yugoslavia, and what was at the time they left for Western Canada part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (although I didn't know that until much later). Like many other Serbs, my grandfather immigrated during the upheavals of World War I to work in the mines, in places like Anyox, a copper-mining town in the remote north of British Columbia that is now a ghostly ruin, and Princeton, in the province's desert interior. My Croatian grandmother met and married him after leaving her family for Vancouver in the 1920s, but the marriage didn't last long, because my grandfather died of pneumonia when my father was only three. With three small children in tow (a fourth had died in infancy), my grandmother came to Vancouver, settling first in Strathcona, the East Vancouver neighborhood that was then home to immigrants from all over the world, including Scandinavia, Italy, and China. She married a Slovenian and had another child, and by the 1950s, they had enough financial stability to move, along with other upwardly mobile working-class immigrants, to a new neighborhood a little further out on the East Hastings artery. They were still there when I was growing up, and I saw that my grandmother had many "Slav" friends in the neighborhood, but I wasn't sure how they differed from the Italians, who were also prevalent. In my father's family, the emphasis was on assimilation, and by virtue of going to university, becoming a lawyer, and marrying my Anglo mother, he left his heritage behind. Although he spoke Serbo-Croatian with his mother, I didn't learn it, and I grew up with no sense of Slav or Croatian culture other than what I could glean indirectly. Because Yugoslavia was under Communist rule and had a language similar to that of Russians, Poles, and Czechs, it seemed to be Eastern European. But the rest was really quite vague. Over the years, I tried to piece together what I could from family stories, but my grandmother was always reluctant to talk about her past, and most of what I know comes second-hand from my father's older sister. One impulse for my trip to a newly independent Croatia was a desire to make up for the fact that my grandmother never returned there and my father and his siblings never visited.

This essay is a modest attempt to enter the terrain of rites of return from the vantage point of someone whose relation to the former Yugoslavia is shaped not only by the loss of language and culture that is often the result of immigration and assimilation, but also by the renewed prominence of the region in contemporary critical discussion of nationalism and imperialism.

Like Hirsch and Miller, I'm skeptical about roots tourism and nostalgia for origins that lends itself to conventional nationalisms, and as a scholar whose work has also been shaped by discourses of queer diaspora, my relation to home and return is a complicated one. Still, inspired by queer, feminist, and de-colonial histories of migration that emphasize affective affiliations across time and place, I wondered whether my personal lack of knowledge about the Balkans could be the point of departure for a more collective history. Rites of return, especially in the context of Holocaust or African diaspora, produce accounts of loss, seeking to explain the effects of absent memories rather than filling historical blanks. That the place from which my own family came was a flashpoint for contemporary discussions of nationalisms, ethnic cleansing, and human rights provided an opportunity for forms of scholarship and writing that combine the personal and the professional. My project was only partially about finding my ancestors' roots—I was also interested in whether a lack of cultural transmission could be traced not just to the immigrant's assimilation and willed forgetting, but also to the changes from Austro-Hungarian Empire, to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, to Yugoslavia, to Croatia that professional historians and ordinary people were still laboring to explain.

The aims of my first trip were relatively modest—to learn more. But they were also meta-critical—to ask what it might be possible to learn through travel or direct experience, even without scholarly or cultural expertise, including language skills. In exploring where my people came from and what it means to ask that question, I draw upon multiple sources: travel-based observations from the streets and the museums, which offer both informal visible evidence and that which has been deliberately constructed, and research based on reading across a range of genres that encompass the scholarly and the popular, the fictional and the nonfictional. Trained to be wary of all of these sources, I am alert to how they supplement and contradict one another. And despite my critical awareness of the problems of both ethnographic and cultural roots tourism, I sought to see for myself. My method is in part that of Carolyn Dinshaw's "amateur," guided by passions that can be an important source of affective knowledge.¹ It is also that of the professional researcher insofar as I was taught, especially through my theoretical training, to see things differently. In particular I came with a conviction, under the influence of Walter Benjamin, that history can be embedded in the landscape and hence available to be felt or sensed in unpredictable and affective ways. Even as a casual tourist to Croatia's Dalmatian coast, it might be possible to learn something.

In drawing on personal forms of reading and observation, rather than conventional research, I seek to perform in my own way the unmapping

process that Yuliya Komska calls for in the introduction to this collection. Sharing her reservations about geo-coding and metageographies, I try to come closer to specific places and locations in order to escape monolithic categories such as Eastern or Central Europe, which are so freighted with historical and conceptual baggage. I use the term “the Balkans” to describe former Yugoslavia and its successor states, but the difficulty of deciding what name to use already bespeaks the problem of efforts to both map and unmap the region. “Croatia” isn’t quite right because it didn’t exist when my grandparents immigrated and because its current terrain has included multiple groups, including Serbs. My working category of the Balkans seeks to displace these more directional categories, but it is also a placeholder in search of more precise descriptions. I often found myself working both with and against the maps, obsessively trying to match up the place names, routes, geographical contours, and histories of shifting borders with my own perceptions, and often failing to be able to reconcile them.

My solution has been to get local, to displace problematic archives with the evidence of my own experience, including the experience of critical reading. Although I appeal to landscape, trying to see what is in front of me, it is not a landscape that is essentialized or devoid of history. To the contrary, I look to geographies of all kinds as resolutely cultural and historical and approach the materiality of landscape and built environment as a site of layered histories that are often discontinuous with one another. Like Kacandes seeking to connect with Poland through elective affinity, I seek to understand the Balkans through what can only be a leap across time and space by means of an eclectic archive that assumes history to be constructed through personal and affective investment. The discontinuities of both geography and history yield forms of not knowing and disorientation that are often suppressed in conventional histories. Hence my turn toward the genre of creative nonfiction, and its incorporation of the literary and the memoir, as models for my own practice and for histories that can perform the work of unmapping. Although personal and affective histories may risk nostalgia or amateurism, when written from a place of critique, they can also be experiments in producing alternative maps.

TRAVEL STORY 2: LIKA 2005

On my second trip to Croatia my entry point was Zagreb, where Gretchen and I braved another rental car to drive to Split for more vacation time on the Dalmatian coast via an overland route that would include Lika, the province my grandmother came from. This time the drive was very easy—over

flat countryside with a stop along the way in a gorgeous national park with lush green forests, rushing rivers and waterfalls, and a historic old mill.

I had had a very hard time finding my grandmother's town on any maps and eventually came to the conclusion that the name might have changed or that it was too small to show up. So all we could do was head for the general area via the one small road heading west toward the coast from Gospić, Lika's main town. Although equally remote, the farmland dotted with small villages was more picturesque and less desolate than the bleak landscape of my grandfather's Krajina. Without much fanfare, we arrived in what I thought might be the spot. It was barely a village—just a church, a few houses, and a graveyard. There didn't seem to be many people around, but again I felt self-conscious and out of place.

As I stopped by the side of the road to take pictures of the landscape, an old man appeared beside us. Unlike the people in Gračac, he wanted to engage with us. But he spoke no English, and even though we had been trying to learn from the Croatian phrase books, we didn't yet have much more than *dobar dan* (good day) and *kako ste?* (how are you?). We happened upon German as a language of common ground, and I tried to ask if he knew anyone with my grandmother's maiden name. I couldn't really understand his answer, but he did seem to understand that my family had come from there. He wanted to know how old I was and if I was married and had children, and seemed perplexed by the fact that someone my age didn't have children. We soon exhausted our limited vocabulary, but there was the sense of goodwill that can mark exchanges between people who can't communicate verbally but want to connect. As we parted paths, he pressed a twenty-kuna note—about a dollar—upon me and insisted that we use it buy *pivo* (beer). Although I was reluctant to take his money, I did so for the sake of the gift economy.

READING STORY 1: SLAVENKA DRAKULIĆ

I am the kind of traveler who reads en route, supplementing what I see with historical background and taking advantage of being on location to make reading that might otherwise seem more remote or abstract come to life. I know that I'm not alone, since even mainstream travel guides provide bibliographies, and bookstores that cater to tourists sell local authors in translation. But I also study this tourist book culture with the trained critical eye of scholar and literary critic, interested to see what genres, from fiction to history to personal essay, and what kinds of authors, both native and non-native, do the job of making the region and its complicated history available to the casual visitor.

Once in Croatia, I found some books that were useful, but also many that were not. Mainstream histories designed for Western readers provide basic background information but can traffic in stereotypes, and they often don't provide the critical analysis I'm looking for to explain the historical timelines.² The more I dug, the more I needed to go back further—from the 1990s breakup of Yugoslavia to Communist Yugoslavia under Tito, to the World War II occupation by the Nazis, to the Balkan Wars and the infamous assassination in Sarajevo that inaugurated World War I, to the Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, Venetian, Byzantine and Roman Empires.³ A dizzying array of maps with shifting borders is necessary to get even the basic geographical facts in place, much less their significance. In the first phase of my reading, I gave up any simple dichotomy between Croats and Serbs, including the pull to make one good and the other bad, but often found myself with a plethora of historical and political details and no way to make sense of them.

For a more synthetic critical framework, I turned to scholarly books such as Maria Todorova's *Imagining the Balkans*, which outstrips most of the popular literature and history in offering a paradigm that both describes the Balkans in its local specificity and explains why it matters to other contexts.⁴ As a Bulgarian scholar situated in the United States, Todorova also bridges the gap between books designed for outsiders and those who are area studies specialists, and she is helpful in explaining why many popular narratives, such as Robert Kaplan's *Balkan Ghosts*, are problematic: they perpetuate the idea of the Balkans as a backward place whose conflicts are the result of perennial ethnic differences.

While history may be the privileged source of expertise for scholars, literature remains important for general audiences, especially since writers are the native informants most likely to be translated. Moreover, as a form of world literature, including its Balkan versions, literary genres can serve the documentary functions assumed to belong to nonfiction genres, and the personal essay can be especially popular because it combines them. One of the most useful writers in my early explorations, especially because her publications were widely available in English in Croatia, was Slavenka Drakulić, whose collections of essays such as *Café Europa* and *They Wouldn't Hurt a Fly* combine historical and cultural expertise and a cosmopolitan political perspective with a personal voice.⁵

Drakulić's work is an example of how the essay form can provide a holistic knowledge that is subjective without compromising its authority. In my search for writing that can do justice to the complexity of the Balkans, and in my own effort here to write such an essay, I've been especially interested in hybrid forms that combine the personal and the general, the creative and

the factual, the fictional and the nonfictional. Experimental use of form can help undo claims to a privileged perspective or vantage point, such as that of the expert (as opposed to the amateur), the insider (as opposed to the outsider), or a specific national or political position (such as that of the victims or losers as opposed to that of the perpetrators or winners). As has often been the case for my other scholarly projects, I have been driven to write because of an absent archive, because I can't find the book I am wanting to read and must instead invent a form that can register that difficulty, such as this essay's effort to combine personal travel narrative with multiple other sources.

Drakulić also provided me with one of the moments of shocking discovery that for me came as much from reading as from direct witnessing or travel. I happened to be reading her work at the same time that I was having trouble finding my grandmother's village in Lika on the available maps. While reading *They Wouldn't Hurt a Fly*, her collection of essays about war criminals and their trials in the Hague, I came across the name I had been looking for in the opening sentence of a chapter: "It was already late at night when a military truck stopped on the outskirts of Gospić, near a village called Pazarište." Drakulić proceeds to tell the story of the massacre of twelve Serbs, rounded up as part of a campaign of "ethnic cleansing" in Gospić, the major town in the province of Lika, under the direction of two Croats, Tihomir Orešković and Mirko Norac, who were part of a group that was tried in Rijeka in 2001–3. In the previous chapter, Drakulić tells the story of the murder in 2000 of Milan Levar by a bomb planted in the spare tire of his car at his mother's house. He had sought, often unsuccessfully, to bring attention to the murder of Serbs (and the destruction of their property) to which he had been a witness. It was startling to discover that the town that I hadn't been able to find anywhere on a map and that had seemed so nondescript when I visited was the site of a major massacre—and moreover, further complicating any simple categories of victims and perpetrators, a massacre of Serbs by Croats. I had expected that, as a Serbian town, Gračac might bear the traces of war, but if Lika was also marked, the sites of war were extensive and unpredictable. It was a reminder of how much I couldn't see or read in the apparently placid landscape.

TRAVEL STORY 3: SARAJEVO TO BELGRADE (2012)

My rite of return to the places from which my grandparents came had been revealing, but as much for what it didn't tell me as for what it did. My interest in the Balkans remained, shifting from direct inquiry into my own family

to the larger context for what I had seen in Gračac and Lika. I wanted to go beyond Croatia to see this bigger picture, and I was longing to see both Sarajevo, the renowned site of Balkan cosmopolitanism including Bosnian Muslim culture, and Belgrade, the former capital of Yugoslavia and the center of a now suspect and stigmatized Serbian culture.

Although we made stops in Mostar, Sarajevo, and Belgrade, they were too brief to get more than a superficial impression, and the real point of the trip was the experience of getting from one country to the next by overland travel, to literally make the connections between Croatia and Bosnia and Serbia across borders that have been imposed politically and conceptually. The literal experience of travel was a surprise at every turn, since I didn't know what to expect of the landscape itself. I saw, for example, that Bosnia includes a tiny bit of Dalmatian coast, because the Neretva River flows into the sea there, and the route to Mostar, an ancient site of trade between East and West, follows its gentle valley through what are otherwise impenetrable mountains that come very close to the coast. Later I learn that Neum, the town at the mouth of the river, was an old Roman settlement, and I think about how the cultural and political geography sometimes follows the natural one. How was the Ottoman Empire's limit and the relative independence of the Dalmatian coast shaped by geography, and when are the borders merely arbitrary? And what about efforts to cross borders, as in Mostar's famous bridge across the Neretva River, which joins, but also separates, Christians from Muslims and was blown up during the war?

The difficulty of traveling from Sarajevo to Belgrade, even though they are not far apart, was especially revealing. There are fairly frequent buses that leave from the Serbian side of Sarajevo. Lured by the romance of train travel, we were curious to take the one train that leaves daily for Belgrade at 8 a.m., a service that had been revived only recently for the first time since the war. The route, involving many passport and ticket checks, is a circuitous one via Croatia in order to avoid a direct border crossing between Bosnia and Serbia. What could be a road trip of a few hours takes all day, especially since the train is extremely old and slow. At first the train is full of students on their way home to smaller towns from university, since it is the beginning of summer vacation. Gradually the locals peel off, and only a few foreigners turn out to be the ones actually going all the way to Serbia: a Japanese guy who is immersed in his screen for the entire trip, and a Canadian-Bosnian girl who is headed to Belgrade for a cousin's wedding.

I try to figure out where I am by watching the landscape from the window, as if that could explain borders past and present. In the mountains of Bosnia, the train hugs picturesque streams, whereas we make a straight shot through flat green fields when we finally get to Serbia. I feel a sense of ominousness

as we approach Belgrade and pass what looks like a Roma camp in a garbage dump. As Gretchen says, we've come to the land of the perpetrators.

But it is not what I expected from the guidebook descriptions of a bleak post-Communist middle-European city. The geography is stunning—the old town is situated on a hill at the confluence of the Sava and Danube Rivers, with the fortress and park of Kalemegdan affording spectacular views. At the water level, there is a promenade lined with cafes and clubs in houseboats. The market is a real market, where old ladies bring fresh produce from the country; raspberries were in season and heaped on the tables in red jewel-like piles. We have only one day and it's not enough.

READING STORY 2: VLADISLAV BAJAC AND OTTOMAN BELGRADE

At the airport leaving Belgrade after our too brief visit, I happened upon a historical novel called *Hamam Balkania* on a table of Serbian books in English. It turned out to be a dream come true—a book about the history of Ottoman Serbia that isn't afraid to embrace Serbia's lengthy connections to Ottoman and Muslim culture rather than seeing them as an aberration to be disavowed and rejected, as Piro Rexhepi's essay details in chapter 2 in this volume. Vladislav Bajac writes a fictional account of the friendship, during the sixteenth-century reign of Suleiman the Magnificent, between the renowned Ottoman architect Sinan, who is depicted as Armenian, and the powerful vizier Mehmed Sokollu/Sokolović, who, like most of the viziers of this period, was a Serb raised in Bosnia. Although he can only speculate about their intimacy, Bajac's account is not entirely far-fetched, since he is drawing on actual historical evidence that the Ottomans made their colonized subjects central to their administrative structure by taking young boys from the provinces and training them to be their loyal servants. Central to Bajac's project is a psychic portrait of colonized identity that belies conventional notions of conversion, enslavement, and nationhood, in which the colonized retain the affective and subjective complexity of coexisting identities—Ottoman and Serb, Muslim and Christian, governed and governing. Sokolović must convert to Islam and display loyalty to the sultan (“submit or die”), yet also finds ways to retain his Serbian identity, if only in the intimacy of his own heart.

Mehmed Sokolović also preserves his Serbian identity more publicly, if covertly, by working with Sinan on building projects in Belgrade, thus directing the material resources of Constantinople to the provinces. Bajac devotes considerable attention to Belgrade's role as a crucial strategic cen-

ter of military offense and defense for the Ottomans, the staging ground for Suleiman's ambition to conquer Budapest, Vienna, and Europe more generally. Belgrade's status as a cosmopolitan crossroads is of no interest to contemporary Serbian nationalisms that construct the Ottoman past as one of subservience.

Further consolidating the close ties between Constantinople and Belgrade are the geographical similarities between the two cities that Sinan points out to Sokolović: "I compared the positions of Belgrade and Istanbul on various maps, more precisely the parts of them known as Kalemegdan and the Golden Horn, and this is what I concluded: Belgrade has the River Sava on one side and the Danube on the other, while Istanbul has the Black Sea on one side and the Sea of Marmara on the other."⁶ Like Sokolović in the novel, I was shocked by the affirmation of a connection that seems so taboo. For Belgrade to be able to claim the romance and mystique that was attached to Constantinople, with its geography of water and continents meeting, its mosques on the seven hills, and its rich cultural history, cuts against a tendency to cast it as another bland Central European city or a subsidiary capital. Reading Bajac helped me understand what I had also, like Sokolov, sensed intuitively but had had a hard time seeing through the haze of historical and political constructions—the beauty of Belgrade's location at the meeting of the Sava and Danube rivers, the spectacular overlook from the fortress at Kalemegdan, and the medieval streets and the riverside culture. That the link to Istanbul is topographic or natural cuts through the political and cultural divisions that have subsequently separated the two places.

Bajac further signals the intimacy of Belgrade and Constantinople/Istanbul by writing, in the contemporary narrative that is interspersed with the Ottoman story, about his friendship, which parallels that of Sinan and Mehmed, with Orhan Pamuk, whose own work focuses on the affective landscape of history in Istanbul.⁷ Bajac dares to both resurrect and imagine Belgrade's Ottoman past, which has been so emphatically suppressed by Serbian nationalisms that have been defined in opposition to Ottoman conquest extending back to the mythic defeat at Kosovo in 1389. Perhaps the story of their linkage can only be ventured through an affective history, a wishful connection (or elective affinity) between past and present and between nations and cultures that have been severed. By writing between literature and history, and between past and present, Bajac, following Pamuk, constructs an affective and archival form of the historical novel that asserts connections that may not be present in the history books or the streets and museums, but can be projected onto the landscape of the city. Like Bajac, I want to see this Ottoman connection, but I'm not sure I can. I am alert to invisibilities and ghostly presences, especially because so much has vanished. Belgrade

adds to my sense of the dividing line between Ottoman Empire and Europe, sometimes a geographical line such as the mountains between Croatia and Bosnia, sometimes a cultural line between Orthodox Serbs and Roman Catholic Croats. The obvious Muslim presence in Bosnia—the mosques and the old bazaar—is only one marker of this history of intimate entanglement.

TRAVEL STORY 4: BELGRADE'S MUSEUMS (2015)

Although walking the streets is a crucial way to see a place for yourself, I also like to see what the museums have to show about how the nation constructs itself and its history. Given the contested status of the “nation” in the former Yugoslavia, accessing the museum is difficult, often literally so. In Belgrade, the National Museum has been closed for over a decade for renovations, apparently delayed not only by lack of funding but also by disputes about the design. (Serbia is more interested in selling itself to the highest bidder, including plans for a giant tower on the water built with money from the United Arab Emirates.) I decide nonetheless to give it a try in hopes of at least seeing the building. The façade is completely obscured by scaffolding, but it does sit on an important open square across from the National Theatre, where ballet, theater, and opera continue to be offered on a regular basis, as one lasting legacy of the Austro-Hungarian presence and its version of national public culture.

We strike out. In a very gruff manner, the guard tells me that nothing is open and seems so hostile that we are afraid to even glance around the foyer. My cajoling skills are useless unless people speak some English, and we retreat defeated. I'm not sure where to go next so we head to the tourist office for a list of other museums, and I try to figure out which ones might be a good substitute. We wander a bit, passing the Hotel Moscow, a relic of Austro-Hungarian Serbia, where even in the morning a man in a tuxedo is playing piano for the people sitting in the faded splendor of the café. We take in the view of the National Assembly and the giant post office, with the Saint Marko cathedral beyond, and consider walking to the Sveti Sava cathedral visible in the distance.

Immediately in front of us I spot a giant museum exhibition poster displayed on the façade of a classical monolith of a building. It turns out to be the Museum of the History of Serbia—perfect—and there is a small exhibition of work by Franz Tittelbach, a Czech historian who became fascinated with Serbian culture in the late nineteenth century and documented its folkways in a variety of ethnographic genres, including writing, drawings and sketches, and collections of costumes. Although there are no English translations (an-

other sign of lacking resources, even though it is presumptuous to expect this), the folk culture itself, as well as the fascination with it, provide visible evidence not only of efforts to construct the origins of Serbian nationalism but of the influence of Ottoman Turks. We have an extended conversation with the young man behind the counter, who is carefully trying to explain to two young German tourists, who are about the same age as he is, that there is no simple answer to their question about whether Serbia is better off independent or united with the rest of the former Yugoslavia. We learn that he has had a difficult time finding a job and that this one may only be temporary and pays a mere 200 euros a month, 100 of which goes to pay his rent.

Afterward, we go to the park around the corner and, quite unexpectedly, find ourselves both crying. What are these tears? Tears for the ordinary difficulty of a capable and eager young man struggling to eke out a life—a job, an apartment, and the chance to travel—and still expressing hope in the midst of precarity. Tears for the connections between present and past—between his foreclosed circumstances and the violence that has taken place here—and for how he, barely alive when it happened, continues to carry its burdens, and for how under other historical circumstances he might have been the perpetrator of violence.

Tears also for our feeble efforts to try to learn about this history here in the Museum of the History of Serbia, where the present and the not-so-distant past are part of a complex longer history of Serbian nationalism, world wars, Ottoman presence, and folk cultures whose documentation can be put to work as evidence of a coherent and singular Serbian nation but could also be evidence of multiple cultural traditions and influences. Even as I find the young German men's question—are you better off independent or united?—to be naively based in the assumption that some version of the nation will provide stability, I too wish I could ask this question and others that are equally blunt and simple: What happened here and how do you feel about it now? What museum of terrible acts are we blindly tracking through on the street? The tears may be sentimental, but they are also the product of frustrated inquiry—the desire for knowledge despite the inevitable failure of any museum to provide answers. They mark the crossroads of history where the touch of human encounter transmits both that which cannot be known and the persistent yearning to know.

READING STORY 3: REBECCA WEST

I resisted reading Rebecca West's massive tome *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* for a long time, not just because the book is so fat and dense, but also be-

cause I was suspicious of the adulation for a woman who was only a short-term visitor. Still one of the most famous Anglophone books about the Balkans, it continues to be listed in the bibliographies for tourists and cited approvingly in many other sources. And in the end, I had to admit my own similarity to West as a casual visitor, albeit a strongly invested one, and I finally read her to see what, if anything, has changed for the non-specialist writer of the Balkans. Although I am wary of an epistemology of tourism that assumes that going there can be knowing there and that the traveler can explain a mysterious region for others, there may be no way to avoid that dilemma given the limits of my own position and my idiosyncratic and associative research practice. Taking up West has proved to be a strategy for exploring my self-consciousness about my own lack of knowledge and the possibility that this writing stages only my own failings rather than a shared and symptomatic ignorance.

As it turns out, reading West is a reminder that both subject position and genre are complicated and that the practice of writing can enable the performance of this complexity. West is no ordinary tourist—she is a modernist and feminist writer whose critical reputation still borders on neglect, and she wrote a sprawling volume that, while not always taken seriously as literature, has the bold ambition not just to explain the region but to ward off the threat of impending war. There is indeed much that is fascinating about West for the person who has just been to the Balkans. Although, unlike Drakulić and Bajac, she is not a native informant, like them, she is willing to write from a subjective position that actually strengthens rather than undermines her authority, and the writerliness of the book, even when overblown, is a reminder to read with care. Although I often disagree wildly with her judgments—she deplores the Ottoman influence, for example—I also appreciate how her love for the Serbs (and the nationalisms they import from Europe) runs against the grain of contemporary presumptions, and I recognize a version of my own romance with the past in her deeply affective relation to Byzantine culture. Her pronouncements, both positive and negative, are shot through with a sometimes outrageously essentializing primitivism that divides East and West along biological lines: “They have something we have not got. . . . A kind of nervous integrity, of muscular wisdom.”⁸

But West’s appreciation for Belgrade, for example, resembles that of Bajac, as she also finds Kalemegdan to be an exemplar of Belgrade’s natural and cultural beauty and its promise, describing it as “one of the most beautiful parks in the world,” whose “charm was separating us from everything outside it, as good parks should do,” and whose wild flowers and greenery amidst the fortifications make it “the prettiest and most courageous piece of optimism I know” (466). For her, Kalemegdan is the heart of a Belgrade

that has persisted in the face of oppression: “This was a very sacred Balkan village; the promontory on which it stood had been sanctified by the blood of men who had died making the simple demand that, since their kind had been created, it might have leave to live” (482). Indeed, West’s sympathy for modern Serbian nationalism is dependent in part on its connections to a primitive peasant life that she also romanticizes as she observes how “the middle class in Yugoslavia is so near to its peasant origin,” a point made vividly clear by the moment when the eponymous black lamb appears in the middle of a cosmopolitan hotel in the arms of a man looking like a Byzantine-era figure.

That [the greeting of a newcomer at the bar] I might have seen in London or Paris or New York. But in none of those great cities have I seen hotel doors slowly swing open to admit, unhurried and at ease, a peasant holding a black lamb in his arms.... He stood still as a Byzantine king in a fresco, while the black lamb twisted and writhed in the firm cradle of his arms, its eyes sometimes catching the light as it turned and shining like small luminous plates. (483)

Indeed, West’s fascination with peasant culture is especially evident in her section on Macedonia, which she constructs as the heart of traditional Slav culture. While she often critiques religion, her modernist secularism is crosshatched by enchantment with Orthodox Christianity and its Byzantine origins. In a church in Skopje at Easter, she sees a woman who for her represents Slav values that have persisted in the face of the long-term oppression exemplified by Ottoman rule: “All this we know with our minds, and with our minds only. But this woman knew it with all her being, because she knew nothing else. It was the medium in which she existed. Turkish misrule had deprived her of all benefit from Western culture; all she had to feed on was the sweetness spilled from the overturned cup of Constantinople” (639). Even as West expresses disdain for the Ottoman Turks, she reaches back to an earlier history in which Byzantine Constantinople spread its own version of imperial influence.

It is easy to critique West for her stereotypes, political sympathies, and her own elitist sense of what matters, but she also provides a cautionary note against too easily assuming one’s ability to do it differently. The frequent outlandishness of her likes and dislikes—her blatant Orientalism and Balkanism—is also a model for an affective approach to writing about the Balkans. The aim is not to get it right but to learn from the place in unexpected ways. Perhaps *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* remains one of the best guides to the Balkans because of its value in drawing attention to the problem of presuming to know a place or a culture.

CODA: MACEDONIA (2015)

We're sitting in Skopje's old town drinking Turkish coffee and eating rice pudding. The shop windows display elaborate party dresses designed for Albanian girls; just up the hill is an Orthodox church with an ornately carved wood iconostasis and a Virgin Mary whose silver hand both invites and withstands touch; also nearby are an old Ottoman hammam that is now the city museum and a number of historic mosques that remain in active use. As I watch men delivering trays of tea in small glasses to the businesses in the area, I'm reminded of old towns in Sarajevo and Istanbul, as well as Cairo, other cities I've visited at the confluence of multiple cultures and histories that continue to display a distinctively Ottoman influence. Skopje is far less symbolically freighted than Sarajevo, which has become the visible and symbolic site of the Muslim presence in the Balkans. It has an everyday cosmopolitanism, even as the overwrought statues of Alexander and his mother Olympia and the museums that proclaim Macedonian nationalism are also a short distance away, and the streets are about to erupt in violence that will barely appear in the global media. Efforts to construct a visible national history, which result in a false spectacle, are fraught here. My desire to resist them by looking for Byzantine and Ottoman histories that precede the modern nation-state could be an equally willful construction, as is my appreciation for the street's signs of cosmopolitanism. I try to see something else, to move between the visible and the invisible as icons and ruins both require, while also acknowledging my own ignorance and inability to see.

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NOTES

This essay would not exist without the generous encouragement and inspiration of Irene Kacandes across many years of conversations. For helpful readings, I wish to thank Lisa Moore, Aaron Sachs, and the members of the Toronto Writing Workshop, especially Elspeth Brown, Eva-Lynn Jagoe, Robyn Autry, Kevin Coleman,

and our teacher Catherine Taylor. Much gratitude also to my traveling companion Gretchen Phillips.

1. For a discussion of the value of amateur knowledge, see Carolyn Dinshaw, *How Soon Is Now?* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).
2. For one of the more prominent, and problematic, examples, see Robert Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), which draws on the authority of his experience as a journalist in the region but promulgates the notion of irresolvable and permanent ethnic tensions. The editors of this collection also cite Kaplan's work as a significant example of geographical determinism.
3. Basic introductions include Mark Mazower, *The Balkans: A Short History* (New York: Modern Library, 2000); Misha Glenny, *The Balkans, 1804–1999* (London: Granta Books, 1999); Marcus Tanner, *Croatia: A Nation Forged in War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997, 2001); John R. Lampe, *Balkans into Southeastern Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). Most of the authoritative scholars are historians by training, who focus primarily on political history and nationalisms but offer less in the way of critical frameworks for understanding culture and everyday life.
4. In addition to Todorova's *Imagining the Balkans*, see also Dušan I. Bjelić and Obrad Savić, eds., *Balkan as Metaphor: Between Globalization and Fragmentation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002); and Radmila Gorup, ed., *After Yugoslavia: The Cultural Spaces of a Vanished Land* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).
5. In addition to Drakulić's work, see personal narratives: Vesna Goldsworthy, *Chernobyl Strawberries: A Memoir* (London: Atlantic Books, 2005); Myrna Kostach, *Prodigal Daughter: A Journey to Byzantium* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2010); and Tony Fabijančić, *Bosnia: In the Footsteps of Gavrilo Princip* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2010). Like fiction writers, such as Bosnian Alexander Hemon and diasporic Serbian Tea Obreht, who have received important critical attention for their writings on the region, all of these writers live outside the Balkans, and very few writers currently living in the former Yugoslavia are translated, much less read widely.
6. Vladislav Bajac, *Hamam Balkania: A Novel and Other Stories*, trans. Randall A. Major (Belgrade: Geopoetika Publishing, 2009), 247.
7. See Orhan Pamuk, *Istanbul: Memories and the City* (New York: Knopf, 2005), a memoir about growing up in Istanbul; Pamuk, *The Museum of Innocence* (New York: Knopf, 2009), his novel; and Pamuk, *The Innocence of Objects: The Museum of Innocence* (New York: Abrams, 2012), about the museum (inspired by the novel) that Pamuk built in the historic neighborhood of Cihangir.
8. Rebecca West, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon: A Journey through Yugoslavia* (originally published 1941; quoted from New York: Penguin, 1994), 661. Subsequent page references in text.

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